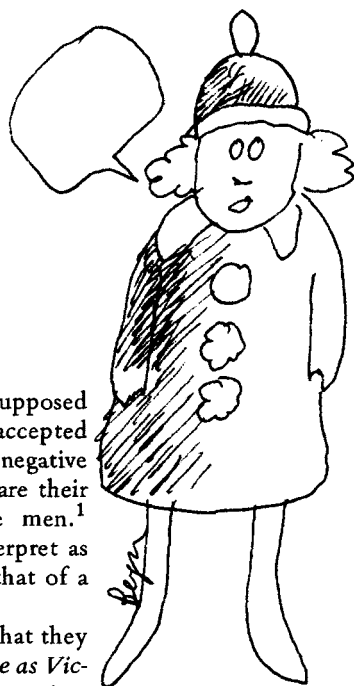


STEREOTYPES OF WOMEN'S SPEECH: THE WORD FROM CARTOONS

By Cheris Kramer



A pervasive stereotype in our culture is the supposed innate inferiority of women, a stereotype accepted even by women. College women hold negative concepts of themselves when they compare their accomplishments with those of college men.¹ They can be satisfied with what they interpret as their inferior contribution (compared to that of a male partner) to a problem-solving discussion.²

How women could come to accept the stereotype that they are inferior is no secret. As such surveys as *Dick and Jane as Victims* make clear, sex stereotyping in grade school readers gives girls (and boys) the repeated message that girls and women are weak, rather silly, passive creatures who are to be tolerated at best—and then only because they give support to males.³ The message from the school readers is supported by the sex role stereotypes conveyed by television programs directed toward children. Nor is there reprieve for the female as she becomes an adult. The same stereotype of the woman as a weak, mentally crippled human is broadcast and published on television and in women's magazines. A report in the *Journal of Communication* on the portrayal of women in the national media documents the pervasiveness of the traditional stereotypes in such areas as short stories and television daytime serials, prime-time drama, and commercials.⁴ The viewers and readers receive sex role guidelines not only concerning appropriate appearance and action but also appropriate speech behavior.

This essay is concerned with the manner in which the speech of men and women is presented in cartoons in large-circulation magazines and, more important, in the evaluation of that speech made by readers. Cartoons offer an excellent source of material about commonly accepted stereotypes. No matter what the element of freshness in the cartoon, the joke will be predicated on what we already know about the way the world

runs. For example, used car salesmen act, look, and speak the way we are accustomed to think used car salesmen act, look, and speak. (And, in a circular process, we get part of our knowledge about used car salesmen from cartoons.) Certainly one of the ways we acquire knowledge about differing sex roles are from the jokes and cartoons which deal (in exaggerated manner) with the supposed actions and speech of men and women in our culture. In few places are the stereotyped differences presented in so concentrated a form. We all know what a female looks like (and what she is usually doing) in a *Playboy* cartoon. Here we will look at what she says in *Playboy* and in other mass-circulation magazine cartoons.⁵

The magazines—*The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Ladies Home Journal*—were chosen because they are large-circulation publications designed to appeal to different identifiable audiences (and therefore offer possibilities for comparison) and because they all carry more than one or two cartoons each issue. The specific dates were chosen to insure uniformity of time period and to obtain an adequate number of cartoons for analysis. The study included 152 cartoon captions from *The New Yorker* (17 February–12 May 1973); eighty-nine from *Playboy* (March–May 1973); thirty-four from the *Ladies Home Journal* (October 1972–September 1973); and twenty-nine from *Cosmopolitan* (January–June 1973). These totals represent all the captions, in those issues, in which an adult talks to one or more adults. Captions in which the speaker or the auditor is a child or animal or an inanimate item were not included in this study. (That meant that almost half of the captions from *Ladies Home Journal* had to be omitted from analysis. The *Journal* cartoons are heavily stocked with children and cats and dogs as speakers or auditors. The societies represented by *The New Yorker*, *Playboy*, and *Cosmopolitan* cartoons, on the other hand, are almost childless.)

Twenty-five or more captions from each source, all from several consecutive issues of the magazine, were reproduced in separate booklets. Copies of each separate booklet were given to four groups of college students in speech classes at the University of Illinois (i.e., one magazine for each group). These students were asked to determine the sex of the speaker from the statements alone (proper names were omitted when they would have made the sex of the speaker evident) and asked, in an open-end question, to state the basis of their decisions. The students were told only that the statements were from magazines. They were asked to place a check next to statements they had read before; booklets with one or more checks were eliminated from analysis and tabulation. For each list of captions, the responses of fifty students (twenty-five male, twenty-five female) were then obtained by random selection from the total of each group who had filled the booklets.

For each of the captions a chi square comparison was made of the number of participants who attributed the statement to a female and the number who attributed it to a male.

The sex of the speaker of more than three-fourths of the cartoon captions was clearly stereotyped. (Seventy-nine percent of the comparisons yielded a significant chi square; see Table 1 for the percentage of significant chi square

scores for each of the four magazines.) *Cosmopolitan*, supposedly the magazine for the self-aware woman, contains the cartoon captions perceived by students as being the most sex stereotyped. As Katz in *Magazines for Libraries* suggests, "Helen Gurley Brown and her staff would have us believe that the *Cosmo* reader is the ideal 'liberated' woman . . . [but] *Cosmo* retains the traditional image of woman."⁶ That image is of the woman as catering to male ideas of what a female should be like.

Name of Magazine	Number of captions evaluated by students	Proportions of comparisons which have significant chi squares
<i>Playboy</i>	27	.78
<i>Cosmopolitan</i>	29	.86
<i>The New Yorker</i>	48	.77
<i>Ladies Home Journal</i>	29	.76

Table 1: Cartoon captions stereotyped as to sex of the speaker.

The question which these figures raised was whether attribution varies as a function of the sex of the participants. To answer this, the number of male and the number of female participants attributing male vs. female enunciation of the caption statements were compared for each of the statements with a 2 x 2 chi square contingency analysis. Of the 133 comparisons only two achieved significance at .05 level. Attribution, then, did not vary by function of the sex of the participants. That is, in only two cases does it seem that the sex of the participant affected her or his estimate of the sex of the speaker in the cartoon. These results clearly indicate that the male and female participants were using the same linguistic stereotypes in assigning the captions to male or female speakers.

The accuracy of the participants' responses is not of great importance here, since sometimes the humor of the cartoon results from role reversal, a male, say, speaking in what is accepted as female language. What is important is the determination of the distinguishing speech characteristics of female and male talk in the cartoons as suggested from an analysis of the captions and from the responses of the readers.

The speech of women in these captions is ineffective and restricted. It cannot deal forthrightly with a number of topics, such as finance and politics, which have great importance in our culture. It cannot be spoken in as many different places as men's speech. Women's speech is weaker than men's speech in emphasis; there are fewer uses of exclamations and curse words.

When writing about how they determined the sex of the speaker of the captions, students characterized the stereotyped women's speech as being stupid, naive, gossipy, emotional, passive, confused, concerned, wordy, and insipid.

One of the most ubiquitous generalizations about women's speech is that it is everlasting. Women are thought to talk and talk. By one measure, frequency of utterance, this study does not confirm this preconception; but its failure to do so only emphasizes a more central stereotype, the primacy of the male. It may

not be surprising that men talk more than women in *Playboy* cartoons (fifty-seven men to thirty-two women speakers), but it is surprising to find that men talk as much as two-and-a-half times more frequently than women in *New Yorker* cartoons, supposedly directed to both male and female readers (112 men to forty-four women). In the *Ladies Home Journal* the caption is given to men as many times as to women (seventeen and seventeen). Only in *Cosmopolitan* do women control more of the captions (eleven men to seventeen women).

Of greater implication is that often the man speaking is putting down another person, often a woman, while frequently when the woman talks it is her speech itself that is the joke. The following statements from *Cosmopolitan*, accurately ascribed to women by three-fourths or more of the students, illustrate how having control of the caption does not mean having control of sense: "I would like to decrease my intelligence and increase my bust." "Nothing wrong with me. I just enjoy the examination!" "----- doesn't want me for my body, he wants me for my brain. I've never been so insulted in my entire life." One female student wrote: "It seems as though when men talk, they just say what they want to say. I think that when women talk, they tend to say a lot more than what's necessary to get their point across." (Average word count for *Cosmopolitan* captions spoken by males was 10.2; for females, 15.5.) Some of the length comes from an attempt on the part of women to soften the effect of their words. The initial words in the following captions illustrate: "I'm afraid you can't stay long. I have to get up early for my karate class." "Maybe we carried this Women's Lib business a bit too far." All but two of the men and two of the women reading the *New Yorker* captions assigned "I'm probably old-fashioned, but I felt much more at home with the Forsytes than I do with the Louds" to a female. In her comments one female student wrote, "Women are more likely to pre-empt their statements with excuses for themselves. Women are more concerned with a smooth emotional atmosphere." There is nothing innately wrong with showing concern for the feelings and ideas of the one spoken to. Yet because this trait is attached to female talk it becomes undesirable because of its association. One female student wrote: "The thinking pattern of some women is such that what they have to say doesn't make sense, or is very emotional, pleasant, concerned, courteous, etc. The statement, 'Oh, girls! I made a mistake with the check. I should have subtracted the tax before I added the tip and divided by eleven' [LHJ], is quite ridiculous and very unorganized like many women seem to be." Another female noted how women were "put down," made to look stupid, when they tried to be pleasant; the student was referring to the caption "Of course I'm enjoying myself, dear—I just wondered if there are any shopping centers nearby" (LHJ). That student made a distinction between women in real life and women as portrayed in the statements. But not all students did. Many mentioned the wordiness of the statements ascribed to women. Few discussed how accurate that stereotype might be or what women were trying to do with those "extra" words.

Women's speech is restricted to fewer locations than men's speech. The men have many places in which they can speak effectively either because of their training and employment or because of their ability to handle business matters.

One female student in assigning the statement "You can't put your own personal check into your own personal account" (LHJ) to a male speaker wrote: "This is really stereotyped. An ignorant woman and the man, the brains in the world." Women seldom were shown otherwise than as housewife, mother, sex object. Statements that indicated the speaker held an authoritarian position were attributed to men. Women's statements were defined primarily by personality traits rather than by professional occupation. One female student wrote: "Doctors, sportsmen and sex conscious people should be men. Social, fickle, nagging and irrational ('It's the maid's day off, so I took the day off too') (LHJ) should be women. I however do not advocate this type of division—I just stuck with the standard." The one location which is woman's to control would seem to be the kitchen. But even here the man, if he enters, can show more sense. Another woman student: "Because society has formed so many stereotypes of what both males and females might say, this has made it easier to determine the sex of the speaker. Women are often considered rather scatterbrained so some guy might say 'How could you possibly smell gas, — — —? We have an all-electric kitchen.'" The *Ladies Home Journal*, whose masthead reads "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman," has a particular propensity to picture the men as stymied for a reaction when women speak. The corners of the mouth are turned down in disbelief as women say such things as "I'll bet you thought I was going to be late to my own wedding, didn't you?" (The cartoon shows her at the church, in a wedding gown but with her hair in curlers). The power she shows in the cartoons is not brain power. Twice in grocery stores, however, women show control. One makes a joke to the butcher: "I want it for dinner . . . not a transplant" (LHJ). One (who is shown wielding a gun) says, "Hand over two club steaks, a package of artichoke hearts, a pound of grapes, and a package of cigarettes" (LHJ). Of the fifty student participants, twenty-three of the women and twenty-four of the men assigned the first to a male speaker. Twenty-one women and twenty-one men assigned the second statement to a male speaker. A number of students wrote that authoritative, direct statements belonged to men.

New Yorker cartoon women speak at home twenty of the forty-four times they speak (not counting cocktail parties). Men speak in a home only twenty of the 112 times they talk (not counting cocktail parties). In fact, for four of the thirteen issues of *The New Yorker* examined, the cartoons do not show her speaking outside a home.

Women aren't so limited to kitchen and home in *Playboy*. The cartoons in that magazine show a fantasy world in which sex, the subject of almost all its cartoons, is possible everywhere. Sex and discussion of sex are found in the bedroom and hotel room and house of prostitution a great deal of the time, of course. But also on the street and in the sea. As a buxom female cavorting with a male sea beast says to a rescuer in a power boat, "Buzz off, buster. Nobody screamed rape around here!"

In the *Cosmopolitan* cartoons studied, only once did a woman speak with force outside the house. And the incongruity between the picture and vocabulary was the joke. An old woman wearing glasses, shawl, and twisted stockings, with petticoat showing, says to the barman: "Chicken soup, on the rocks." (Old

women have an independence of men—they are no longer sex objects.) One other *Cosmopolitan* woman showed forcefulness in her speech. A middle-aged woman, holding a pistol, says to the policeman at her front door: "Ms. Claypool if you don't mind!" She evidently had had to kill her husband, whose prone body is partly visible, to be able to say it. (Only 9 of the 50 students thought that the above statement, title omitted, was spoken by a female.) Women, then, are shown to be restricted not only in how they talk but where they talk.

Another restriction is *what* they can talk about. The *New Yorker* matron says to the tight-lipped, barely patient broker: "Now tell me, Mr. Hilbert, does Merrill Lynch think utilities are going to keep on being iffy?" Comments by students, male and female, mention that women do not control a "business-like" rhetoric. Commenting on the topic cues in captions which helped them determine if the speaker were male or female, a man wrote: "Women are expected to make mistakes with money. Most things connected with giving money and wanting to participate in or watch sports are male. Asking for advice, asking for money, and making mistakes on tipping are girls." (It's interesting to note the sex division of "males" and "girls.")

Nor are women as forceful in their speech as men. A female student wrote of *Ladies Home Journal* cartoon captions, "Some of the statements were vague, confused or sounded like some featherbrain had said it, which I usually associated with a spacey girl. ('Have you something that says "thank you," but in a disappointed way?') Some seemed to show the patience that men put on to put up with their spacey wives ('———, I've told you time and again not to walk in front of the TV during a ninety-five yard punt return!')"

Oaths combined with exclamations were attributed by most students to males: "Come back with my skis, you dirty . . .!" (*Cosmopolitan*). "To hell with what the Sierra Club could do with the cost of a single F-111 fighter plane! Think what *I* could do with the cost of a single F-111 fighter plane!" (*New Yorker*). With the "hell," the "masculine" topic, the exclamation point, and the emphatic "I," it is unlikely that the speaker would be imagined as a woman.

A study of the cartoons and the evaluations of the students makes it clear, in fact, that the evaluations as to the sex of the speaker of the captions were made on a number of stereotypes which add up to the following composite. The speech of men is concerned with "important" aspects of our society; it is logical, literal, businesslike, sparse (although sprinkled with curse words), concise, harsh, unfeeling, in control. The speech of women is concerned with "trivial" subjects, inappropriate to many locations, wordy, emotional, unorganized, out of control.

Two of the magazines studied—*Ladies Home Journal* (circulation seven million) and *Cosmopolitan* (1,406,000)—are directed toward an audience of women. *The New Yorker* (465,000) aims for both female and male readers. *Playboy* (6,000,000) is aimed primarily to men. However, the reference publication *Magazines for Libraries* recommends *Playboy* as "A good general magazine which has appeal for men and women. . . . The cartoons are a bit excessive sexually, yet entertaining and witty. . . . Editorially the magazine is interested in 'today's' world and concerns."⁷ The cartoons in these magazines are probably looked at by thousands who do not read the stories or articles or look closely at

the advertisements. And, as this study has made clear, the speech and the accompanying sex roles of the cartoons are heavily stereotyped. They act as exaggerated reflections and reinforcements of the sex role stereotypes found in our society. One male commenting on the captions wrote: "The roles portrayed through these statements were created by our society, and have been learned by me. I will probably teach them to my children, consciously, or unconsciously." Unless the situation changes he will have help from the cartoons in mass-circulation journals.

NOTES

A version of this paper was presented at the 1974 Speech Communication Association convention.

¹Paul Rosenkrantz, Susan Vogel, Helen Bee, Inge Broverman, and Donald M. Broverman, "Sex-Role Stereotypes and Self-Concepts in College Students," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 32 (1968), 287-95.

²Fred Hilpert, Cheris Kramer, and Ruth Anne Clark, "Participants' Perceptions of Self and Partner in Mixed-Sex Dyads," *Central States Speech Journal*, in press.

³*Dick and Jane as Victims: Sex Stereotyping in Children's Readers* (Princeton, N. J.: Women on Words and Images, 1972).

⁴"Women: Nine Reports on Role, Image, and Message," *Journal of Communication* 24 (Spring 1974), 102-55.

⁵A preliminary analysis of *The New Yorker* cartoons alone is reported in Cheris Kramer, "Folklinguistics," *Psychology Today* 8 (June 1974), 82-85.

⁶William Katz, *Magazines for Libraries*, 2nd ed. (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1972), p. 749.

⁷Katz, p. 552.

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